

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ALBERT SHALET

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: April 26, 1988

© 1999

Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

AS - Albert Paul Shalet [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: April 26, 1988

*Tape one, side one:*

PS: ...26, April 1988. Mr. Shalet, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

AS: That would have been the 7th Armored Division.

PS: Did you know of the existence of this particular camp you would liberate before you arrived there?

AS: No I did not.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews and political prisoners in Europe?

AS: We had heard a great deal of this, all during the war before I even entered the service.

PS: Can you describe what you knew about what you had heard or what you knew about mass murders?

AS: Well, I can only say that the media at the time, mainly newspapers, ran rather prolific articles. However, I think in the ensuing years since the war they have found out so much more that more light has been shed upon the more salient, horrendous things that really took place. I think we're learning more about these incidents than we ever did before because of the media, the improvements in the media.

PS: Prior to your arrival at the concentration camp, had you seen any evidence of Nazi atrocities against humanity?

AS: No, I must say we did not. The first place that we arrived, which of course was Nordhausen--I think that's in the section of the Ruhr Valley in Germany--that was the first evidence that I had ever seen.

PS: Prior to your arrival at the concentration camp, had you seen any liberated, displaced persons, slave laborers or liberated prisoners of war?

AS: Yes, there were many, many people wandering throughout Europe, and Belgium, France, and particularly in Germany, along the Rhine and other outstanding valleys and rivers. It was very difficult to tell whether or not they were recently escaped or liberated prisoners, or whether they were people who were actual residents or citizens of whatever country we were in. They looked, they all looked very similar in their garb. That is to say not necessarily prison garb, but we couldn't tell whether or not they were former inmates of a prison. That was difficult to determine.

PS: Could you determine and describe their physical and/or mental condition?

AS: If you're referring to the people I just described...

PS: Yes.

AS: Very few of them looked what we would call by today's standards, well-fed. Most of them looked like they were pretty destitute, except for the upper classes, which had access to more food, better shelter and clothing, of course, than the people who had been displaced all over the continent.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp you liberated and its location, and if possible the date when you arrived at the camp site?

AS: The name of that concentration camp goes by that of Nordhausen. And I would say that would be in the section of the Ruhr Valley of Germany, approximately the Ruhr Valley section. And took place, that liberation took place approximately the 22nd of April of 1945.

PS: Right.

AS: I remember that well, because it was about the time that President Roosevelt had passed away.

PS: To the best of your memory, can you describe what you saw at the camp and what you felt at the time?

AS: That was a camp where the V-2, or commonly known Buzz bombs were created. They were on tracks in various stages of assembly. I think most of the work was done by people who had been captured and incarcerated at the prison. However, the more professional people wore an entirely different uniform and, of course, exhibited a different attitude than the actual prisoners did. There was some sort of what we'd call a pecking order or a segregation there wherein the prisoners kept to themselves and did their work and the other people performed their duties of supervision.

PS: Can you describe, Mr. Shalet, the reaction of the prisoners when you and your unit entered Nordhausen? At their, say, their moment of liberation.

AS: The moment of liberation when we drove in there in our tanks and half tracks and armored cars and other vehicles was one of, oh, hysteria, jubilation, mixed with sadness and joy, and every emotion known to mankind. It was absolutely astounding and unbelievable. Some of these people were crawling around in utter filth. Their uniforms were torn. Some of the uniforms were missing. Some of them looked like they had terrible ulcers and sores all over their bodies. And most of them were thoroughly emaciated and hardly able to speak.

PS: Can you estimate approximately how many prisoners there were, and if, were there many dead?

AS: At that time it was difficult for me to determine because we weren't there more than a couple of hours. According to a recent television telecast, about a month ago, there were many, many hundreds that I had no idea were there. In fact, it astounded me when they said that there were several hundred there, wherein I had thought there were perhaps 150 or so.

PS: Living? Or...

AS: Well, in various stages of life if you want to say that. Of course some of them looked like they were about to expire.

PS: Can you describe what you saw of extermination? Were there at Nordhausen that you saw ovens or did you see the, any of the methods of extermination?

AS: Yes. We were taken through several of the oven and gas chambers, mainly the oven chambers, wherein parts of human bodies and skeletons were still visible through the partly open oven doors. They also showed us a room wherein porcelain fixtures were used to place prisoners in an either prone or on the back position to knock out gold from teeth, from the fittings, settings of teeth.

PS: Were you able to save any that were near death? In other words was your out-, was your unit equipped to give any kind of aid or food or anything at all?

AS: The only thing that I can remember, this going back some forty-odd years, the only thing that I can remember was the token rations that were distributed at that time, to help shore up the health of those that were, that had survived. I think before we got there, most of the dead, the dying, and the seriously ill had been removed to other areas before we could actually see them. That, I think most of that contingent was taken care of by the medics and other people who were employed by the army to do that kind of work.

PS: So, there had been at that time a...

AS: A [unclear] registration in other words.

PS: Yeah. There had been at that time by American, other American units, treatment and removal of...

AS: Perhaps.

PS: Some of the...

AS: Perhaps they were. I didn't really see them, but I'm pretty sure that somebody was in charge of removing those people.

PS: Do you know if this particular camp was set up for Jews only or do you have, did it seem to be pretty much a mixed group?

AS: Difficult to say. Very, very difficult to say. I feel that if I had had a chance to talk to some of them, I probably would have gotten a myriad of languages, but time didn't permit me. We were in there and out of there in such a short time.

PS: So you had no...

AS: So I have no facts to...

PS: Note...

AS: Present along that...

PS: Of what nationality groups were...

AS: Not really.

PS: Right.

AS: However, I did see a lot of tattoo flesh, wherein numbers, I don't know whether these numbers symbolized a certain nationality or not, but they were thoroughly tattooed on their wrists.

PS: Did you, were there any children? Did you see any children among either the living or dead?

AS: No, I did not observe any children or very young people at all.

PS: Can you please describe the responsibilities, if any, that you and your unit had been assigned in arranging for transfer and care of prisoners?

AS: Our unit transported, the truck mainly, or half tracks in some instances, transported these people to another depot or depots, if you will, wherein they were to stay for a few days to regain some modicum of health through adequate feeding, before they were put on what we would call Displaced Person trains or transportation to their various countries.

PS: Can you describe, well, you did describe the reaction of the prisoners as you entered the camp. At that time were there any German guards still left when you arrived?

AS: If there were I could not determine whether or not they were actual guards. By that time the camp people in charge had been taken prisoner by our people.

PS: Yeah. There was, as far as you know there was no defense, no resistance from the Germans.

AS: I would say none whatsoever, or very, very little if there was. I did not see or hear any.

PS: Your unit was not prepared, were they, or were they or not, with food or medical supplies to treat the...

AS: I, as I remember, these, within a few hours, and certainly no more than 24 hours, these things arrived to treat these people before they were sent to depots to be transported to their countries.

PS: You say you were there only a few hours at the, at Nordhausen. When you left did other, any other American units replace you in the camp or were there others, someone...

AS: I think there were others. If I remember properly there was a, properly, there were other contingents which were trained specifically to come in and do this kind of work, after our liberation job was over.

PS: Were there other, any other American troops there at the time that you left? Did you, at that time were there other troops still remaining within the camp?

AS: I feel that there were. If my memory serves me properly there were some left in charge, like MPs, for instance, or people that were trained as, specifically to handle displaced persons. There were, there were that type of personnel available at the time.

PS: You had mentioned about the manufacture of the V-2 rockets at Nordhausen. Can you describe what you saw, what you were, were you shown the facilities or...

AS: Yes. That was extremely interesting. They showed us cutaway models. Whether or not our people had done that previously or whether the Germans had done that

to show their personnel what they were actually working on. That would be rather hard to conceive of, given the type of security that German guards and people that were running the camp had imposed upon workers there. We saw missiles which were stashed to one side and ready to be sent to a launching site, the location exactly where, I don't know at this point. I don't remember.

PS: Were not these V-2 rockets that you refer to, the rockets that were being launched from the Channel coast toward England? Especially to be concentrated on London.

AS: Correct.

PS: Right. And at that time I believe this was the first missile rocket that was ever launched.

AS: Correct.

PS: And I recall there was a great deal of damage, and casualties within the area of London being done by these missiles.

AS: Well, London was, some people say it was over half destroyed. I don't think this is true, having gone back there after the war for a visit. I don't think this is entirely true. However, a great deal of it, perhaps a third of it was extremely badly damaged, including some museums and other points of interest, to say nothing of homes and hospitals.

PS: Did the experience of seeing the prisoners have any effect on your feelings about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

AS: Yes. This left me with a very, very, very deep trauma, which I don't think I will ever recover from. I would have to be inhuman to say that I would recover from something like this. I don't think that anybody having experienced what I did, and what I saw, would ever really put it out of their mind completely.

PS: In other words, others have seen through documentaries, television and so forth...

AS: Yes, and I might...

PS: That, do you feel that if you had not been an eye witness yourself to the atrocities, to the Nazi atrocities against humanity that you would not feel as strongly as you do. That you do feel more strongly having been with...

AS: Having seen this first hand, visually, and being able to, if I so desired, reach out and touch the objects I saw, and these things are indelibly impressed upon the psyche. There is no, no doubt about it at all. And I think Mr. Freud, if he were alive today, would bear me out on this. It does affect one's life one way or another.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did they react much the same as you? Did you talk and discuss afterwards what you experienced?

AS: We were given very little time to actually say too much about it. They were anxious to get on their way into other sections of Europe. The war was coming to a very, very rapid conclusion at that time. And we were on our way with our units up to northern

Germany to meet the Russians. Therefore there was very, very little time to actually sit down at a round table discussion and talk these things out in detail.

PS: And your reaction to your experiences no doubt lingered long after you left the camp and...

AS: Oh yeah.

PS: Has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back?

AS: Well, perhaps in a subliminal or, it's hard to, that's a very, very hard question to answer, a very hard question to answer. Perhaps I think these things, traumatic as they are, do have some coloring affect on one's life, yes.

PS: At the time that you discovered the atrocities there at Nordhausen, at that time were you aware that this was only one of many Nazi concentration camps?

AS: Yes. Indeed I was aware of this. We were told about these during basic training and also prior to going in the service. There was much written in the newspapers and on the radio at that time about the various camps in Germany, some of which had been destroyed by bombers even before I went to Europe.

PS: So you did realize that the dead that you saw were just a small group of the many millions that were slaughtered?

AS: Undoubtedly. A very true statement.

PS: In your own mind, can you in any way explain the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps and death camps?

AS: I feel that they had the same reasons that we did in treating the Japanese as we did when they, when we incarcerated them in camps over here. It's almost like the pot calling the kettle black in that respect. However, the two can't really be compared because of the terrible atrocities that were inflicted upon all nationalities in Germany, whereas over here very little of that here, if any, was done to anyone.

PS: No, I think the Japanese that were incarcerated, even though it might have been unjust...

AS: They fared real well.

PS: Their conditions...

AS: They fared very well.

PS: I understand were very, very good. After you left the camp, was there any official or unofficial meeting to discuss what you had experienced at the plant, at the camp?

AS: I really can't answer that factually because I don't remember.

PS: Yeah.

AS: Unfortunately.

PS: Do you know if there was any regimental history that included this experience?

AS: Regimental history. I think that it would be more advisable to delve into an archive which would include all data, all important and pertinent data on the Holocaust in general. I think these facts could be borne out in such archives.



PS: Do you have any recollection of when you first heard of the gassing of concentration camp prisoners?

AS: Oddly enough I heard more about that post-war than I did pre- or during the war. My reactions, as I hear more about it and see more documentation and hear more people discussing it, is one of absolute utter incomprehensible horror. I just can't understand it. I don't understand how anything like this could have happened, to any race of people at all, anywhere in the world, at any time.

PS: Did any of the prisoners that you liberated ever contact you, or did you by chance just meet any of those that were, any concentration camp prisoners who were in...

AS: No.

PS: Nordhausen?

AS: No, not there. However when we set up a collection point for prisoners at Friedland, near the University of Göttingen, these people, these German GIs passed through a checkpoint wherein they had to throw down all their weapons and it reached at least 50 feet high, very close to it. A mountain of all kinds of weapons was accumulated there in the fields of Friedland. There was only one incident wherein I had a fairly close contact. A German Captain gave me his watch, a German made stainless steel watch which I still have. That's the only souvenir I brought back with me that I can remember.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after the war?

AS: Approximately 14 months, approximately.

PS: You were then part of...

AS: Occupation.

PS: Army of Occupation.

AS: The Army of Occupation.

PS: Now during your, those 14 months as part of the Army of Occupation, did you witness the handling, managing, or distribution of concentration camp survivors?

AS: No.

PS: Slave labor?

AS: No.

PS: Displaced persons?

AS: Displaced persons, yes. I and my commanding officer who spoke several languages quite fluently, German in particular, German and French--who incidentally went on to become Superintendent of West Point Military Academy in New York--he and I were in charge of a couple of transports for displaced persons, which was immediately following the war. At least, oh, 48 hours after the war we were put in charge of trains that went up to the Russian border and then came back.

PS: Yeah, we've gone over I think pretty thoroughly Mr. Shalet, your experiences. Is there anything that you would like to add to your testimony?

AS: I will...

PS: Anything at all that we haven't covered?

AS: I just want to say that I hope that the hordes of people that are going to descend upon the world in future generations will never, never be able to forget. I don't know how they will ever be able to impress upon them like you and I were impressed upon, but I hope they will not forget what happened, so as to preclude it ever happening again.

PS: Right. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Shalet...

AS: You're welcome.

PS: For your most meaningful testimony, and we thank you.

AS: You're very very welcome. [tape off then on]

PS: Mr. Shalet wishes to add to his testimony. The addition will be on the reverse side of this tape, Side B.

*Tape one, side two:*

AS: Albert Paul Shalet, addendum part A to Holocaust testimony, recorded in April of 1988. Nordhausen, a city in west East Germany, in the Erfurt district on the Zorge River near the city of Erfurt, manufactures include textiles, machinery and glass, founded by 1000. Nordhausen was a free city from the mid 13th Century until 1803, when it became a part of Prussia. During World War II the city was the site of a notorious German concentration camp, and one of the largest underground V-2 rocket plants in Germany. About 50 percent of the city was destroyed during World War II. Population 1980 estimated 46,691.

The following is final addendum, part B to the same tape recorded in April of 1988. I can't begin to tell how deeply I have appreciated the truly momentous opportunity to tape record my own impressions of the Nazi Holocaust, close to the end of World War II in west eastern Erfurt district of Germany. The factual events which I have described in this tape were, are and shall forever be, and I would swear this under testimonial oath in any world court absolutely true, and therewith instantly communicable to and understood quite fully by any persons involved in that horrible upheaval. In truth, a form of Armageddon. In short, I witnessed first hand and at once the living and the dead, and the accomplished results Death, capital D-E-A-T-H. It is undeniably incumbent upon the populaces of a future world that these will *never* forget what we must deem and consider unforgivable, unbelievable, untenable, yet unfortunately completely and utterly livable, as those victims could they ever rise from their ash filled pits also bear out as fully valid witnesses in their entitlement to eternal wrath to the perpetrators of cruelty and unkindness to the human race.

PS: Thank you, Paul.